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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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October 2022

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The Catholic church is not a daily news item. When it does hit the headlines, it is often for the wrong reasons. Surely, the most sustained and intense media scrutiny of the church came following the disclosure of the extent of clergy sex abuse and the bishops' woeful response to the victims and their lack of accountability to the faithful. Recently, many American Catholics were perplexed when some bishops threatened to deny Holy Communion to Catholic politicians who support *Roe v. Wade*, even when they do so only for reasons of national public policy. In comparison, the announcement on January 14, 2022 by then bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix, Arizona, that baptisms performed by a priest of the diocese over twenty years were *invalid*, might seem of little consequence. In fact, it strikes some Catholics like caviling to think that using the word 'we' instead of 'I' in the words of baptism crossed a sacred boundary that caused the bishop to call for the rebaptism of scores of individuals. Did their pastor, Fr. Andres Arango, who had administered those baptisms with the slightly altered formula, stray so far from Catholic practice that men and women who for a good part of their lives believed that they were Catholics and practiced their faith loyally were, according to church law, not baptised at all?

The issue, which has received scant notice in the media, is actually far from trivial. It forces to the surface a number of foundational issues that touch on the theology of the sacraments and of the church. It also raises issues of pastoral judgment and leadership. Catholics need to know what kind of thinking goes into such decisions – decisions that not only affect those who have been directed to be baptised a second time, but the rank-and-file Catholics who have to make sense of their pastors' directives. Decision makers in the church, too, need to explain what kind of

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theology justifies such decisions. Meaningful explanations are part and parcel of evangelization today.

It might be helpful for Catholics wondering what is happening in the church, if I shared some thoughts on the sacraments from a theologian's perspective. My aim is to provide some insight into how sacramental theology has changed since the days of my youth and why it is important to rethink every now and then what we believe when we talk about the sacraments and receive them.[1]

A MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY THAT HAS SERVED THE CHURCH WELL

The sacramental theology that was taught at Catholic schools, colleges, and seminaries before the reforms of Vatican II was the one I and my classmates learned at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, in the 1960s. The sacraments could be identified by their matter and form and by their minister. The discussion of each of the seven sacraments began by determining its unchangeable material element (e.g., water or unleavened bread or chrism) and which verbal formula was spoken in conjunction with this matter. There was no flexibility when it came to pronouncing the appropriate formula of prayer. As a young priest I was taught that there was no room for variation or expansion upon the sacramental formula. I had to memorise it exactly and speak it precisely.

Hardly anyone called this 'matter and form sacramental theology' into question. It had been operative in the church since the twelfth century at least, and its most influential exponent, St. Thomas Aquinas, had based his thought on the categories provided by the newly rediscovered writings of Aristotle. 'Matter' and 'form' were two of the classical 'causes' Aristotle had identified to explain the physical world. These causes explain the reality before me and how it is to be defined. They explain how this reality differs from other things. The 'matter' and 'form' of the sacraments, too, explain how they are 'causes' – outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace. After the great scholastic thinkers, sacraments were broadly understood in this way in some form or other until Vatican II.

'Matter and form sacramental theology' had the advantage of being fairly easy to understand and explain, quite apart from Aristotle's intricate theory of hylomorphism. But it also had certain drawbacks. It tended to oversimplify the sacraments and it decoupled them from other, equally meaningful dimensions of ecclesial reality, such as the liturgical context in which a sacrament

1 I wish to thank my friend and fellow theologian Dr. Richard Shields for his assistance. His suggestions have helped me clarify my ideas and improve how I have expressed them.

is celebrated, the human and interpersonal action among the persons administering and receiving the sacraments, and the tendency over time for words and gestures to change their meaning. It also exemplified a strong proclivity toward legalistic solutions and favored juridical expressions. Not infrequently, a legalistic mindset manifested itself in obsessive behavior regarding the rubrics of the Mass and the sacraments and evoked scrupulosity in some priests.

Thinkers had long acknowledged that words express how something is to be understood. But 'matter and form sacramental theology' did not do justice to another important role of sacramental words and gestures, namely, how they *signify* the reality to which they point. The richness of signification was important to Aquinas and to most theologians before him. But standard 'matter and form sacramental theology' thrived on a static one-to-one approach to reality that ignored the many layers of meaning of a word or action, and showed little adaptability to changing human and cultural contexts. Its strengths lay in clarity and immediacy, not in context and comprehensiveness.

Is this 'matter and form sacramental theology' the *only* way Catholics can understand the sacraments? A recent Pew survey suggests that a great number of Catholics do not give much thought to the meaning of the sacraments and that what they think happens in a sacrament is not in agreement with the traditional catechism teachings on the sacraments. Given this situation, I mean no disrespect for the achievements of high scholasticism to say that 'matter and form sacramental theology' has lost its intellectual vigor and pastoral moorings. 'Matter and form sacramental theology' is not wrong *tout court*, of course, but it needs to be integrated into a richer sacramental pattern in order to meet believers' changing needs for intelligibility.

It is no wonder, then, that sacramental theology was ripe for newer and more adequate categories of thought in the years shortly before and after Vatican II. The form of sacramental theology taught today is far from the 'matter and form' versions of the past. It has been enriched by the results of biblical scholarship, theological anthropology (grace, personhood, secularity), contemporary epistemology (the richness of language, the role of metaphor and symbols, and broader ways of knowing), the role of history in formulating doctrine and determining ecclesial practices, and openness to the contribution of culture and cultural studies in understanding ourselves and the wider world. Post-conciliar sacramental theology represents a sea change in the hands of such theologians as Louis-Marie Chauvet, Kenan Osborne, and Kevin W. Irwin, or even in the rich synthesis of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 1210-1690). 'Matter and form' will always

have their role to play, but the days of isolating them from the other elements of a sacrament are long past.

If, then, the personal, ecclesial, and pastoral elements of understanding the sacraments situate them in a much broader context today, what contribution might these factors make in addressing the case of Fr. Arango?

THE SACRAMENTS ARE FOR PEOPLE

A constant in sacramental theory has been the unshakeable conviction that the sacraments exist for the salvation of men and women. The sacraments are the privileged, but by no means the only way by which the Trinity shares their life with humankind. *Sacramenta pro hominibus sunt* – sacraments exist for the sake of weak and sinful men and women, according to an age-old theological adage. This conviction grounds the sacraments and their administration.

If there is a 'sacramental order' (or 'economy' in theological parlance), it is not there to perpetuate itself but to be of service to human salvation by mediating it. A 'sacramental order' is the context that offers sinful humankind trust and confidence in the ultimate efficacy of all seven sacraments. A 'sacramental order' must have a certain flexibility, so that it does not degenerate into a self-serving 'system.' Rules, guidelines, and rubrics are provided as the normal way the sacraments are administered – and they should be observed. But rules must *not* be allowed to obscure the fact that salvation is always shared with other persons. Far from saying that 'rules are meant to be broken,' a 'sacramental order' in the church strongly reaffirms Jesus' position that 'the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27 – New Revised Standard Version). Is there more flexibility in the administration of baptism than the solution of Bishop Olmsted?

In baptism, the recipients are incorporated into a community of salvation and belong to the people of God. This is true of all the sacraments, which confirm the individual in the divine life by binding her more closely with others in the church. Through the sacraments a Christian grows in that shared life. That is why the Second Vatican Council can speak of the church as the 'universal sacrament of salvation' (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 48). The renowned French theologian Henri de Lubac, S.J., reminded the church of this insight as early as 1938, and the German bishops vigorously promoted it at Vatican II.

Take penance, for example. The ecclesial dimension of the sacrament means that the penitent is not only reconciled to God but is also reconciled with his brothers and sisters in the faith. An

ecclesial dimension is true, as well, for marriage, which is often misconstrued solely as deeply personal and exclusive bonding. This romanticised understanding of marriage easily misses the communal dimension. The union of husband and wife in the sacrament of marriage is both a figure of the church and a true expression of a life that is shared with the community of believers and not independent of them.

Let us return to the question of the *words* of baptism. One need not explicitly say 'we baptise' in order to express this social, ecclesial bond brought about by baptism, for this bond is realised in the very act of baptising a person into the body of Christ. To say 'I baptise' does not exclude the concomitant action of the community in welcoming the baptised person into the church. But the community of believers that welcomes the newly baptised into the Church cannot be meaningless and without effect. Its welcome, too, belongs to the sacramental action. Fr. Arango appears to have been keenly aware of the communal character of baptism but not entirely clear about how the baptismal formula in the singular expresses it.

The *intention* of the minister also plays an indispensable role in every sacramental action. Most of the sacraments are administered only by a priest, deacon or bishop. In an extreme emergency, however, lay persons are permitted to baptise. The minister celebrates the sacrament according to the mind of the church. At the very least, the minister intends to do what the Church intends in positing a sacrament. In the mind of a non-Catholic administering baptism in an emergency situation, this intention might be confused and vague, but that does not negate the intention. Can the same be said of a Catholic minister who exhibits some confusion when celebrating a sacrament? Do we have reason to doubt that Fr. Arango intended to do what the church intends? How much latitude is permissible here?

THE PASTORAL DIMENSION

A final thought that might help us make sense of the confusing case before us is the pastoring activity of the celebrant and the welcoming community – pastoral care. 'The care of souls' (*cura animarum*) demands a sensitivity and a delicacy in meeting the spiritual needs of people. Each penitent is different, each couple is unique, each child preparing to receive the Eucharist is precious. The minister of the sacrament must deal with each individual case by representing Christ the Good Shepherd here and now for this unique person and within this specific community. This task demands great love, deep insight, delicate tact, and total dedication from the minister.

A pastor recognises when a person is being called to deeper life by the Spirit and facilitates that movement, whatever the circumstances might be. A pastor responds to a soul that longs for deeper communion with the Lord and does not stand in the way of that burgeoning love. The focus of attention of the minister of the sacrament must always be the recipient – the man, woman or child needful of divine grace.

The pastoral quality of administering the sacraments is more than mere 'window dressing.' Pastoral care is an integral element of every celebration of a sacrament. It is the concrete expression of the minister's awareness of the Trinity's love for this individual or group. When the minister has a pastoral heart and mind, it opens his eyes both to the questions, doubts, and hidden anxieties of the life of faith and to a person's deeper yearnings for divine love. The same holds true for the community celebrating the sacrament and which participates in the pastoral care of the presiding minister.

CONCLUSION

I offer these reflections to help Catholics better understand the sacraments in general, but also to help them deal with situations of sacramental ministry that are sometimes outside the bounds of what is normal and that can provoke confusion. I have tried to raise pertinent questions for thinking through a confusing and painful pastoral situation in an American diocese against the background of a richer general sacramental theology. Is rebaptism in the case we've examined the *only* solution? Is it the best pastoral solution? Reflecting on a particular situation in one local church might also be a catalyst for deeper reflection on sacramental and pastoral practice in other local churches. I hope that my observations offer a possible model for approaching other complex pastoral situations in times that are challenging for the entire church. A historical and theological perspective is integral to authentic discernment and can assist Catholics to not only form questions for themselves, but also help them discuss difficult situations with others.

Catholics today are called to be co-responsible for the church along with their pastors and bishops. The synodal path on which Pope Francis invites us to journey together will require honest conversations, mutual listening, and open minds. Good communication requires words and ideas that resonate with the experience of ordinary Catholics today. My sincere hope is that such communication will create the needed space to respond to the often surprising and unanticipated guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.